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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000684

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [BG](#)

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR VISITS MADHUPUR, DISCUSSES CUSTODIAL  
DEATH OF GARO ACTIVIST

REF: A. DHAKA 484

[1](#)B. DHAKA 663

Classified By: Ambassador Patricia A. Butenis, reason para 1.4(d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY. No charges have been filed and no action taken in the case of Choilesh Ritchil, the Christian Garo activist from Madhupur who was killed by the army on March [1](#)18. This was the situation as described to the Ambassador by Garo activists when she visited the Pirgachha Catholic Mission in Madhupur on April 18. Army Chief of Staff Moeen attributed Ritchil's death to an incident while intoxicated, though he said he would ensure a proper investigation was conducted. END SUMMARY.

AMBASSADOR VISITS MADHUPUR  
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[1](#)2. (C) On April 18, the Ambassador visited Pirgachha Catholic Mission, run by American missionary Father Eugene Homrich. There she met with representatives of the Garo community, including Pratap Sangma, a relative of Choilesh Ritchil (Reftel A) who was tortured along with Ritchil but was later released. The local Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) intelligence chief, the Assistant Police Inspector for the region, and a local government representative also attended the meeting.

[1](#)3. (C) Pratap described how he and Ritchil were taken into custody by army soldiers after attending a wedding nearby. He said Ritchil was hung upside-down, beaten with canes, and shocked with electricity on his extremities while questioned about alleged arms sales. Pratap told us he was also beaten and shocked, though not as severely. Early the next morning, Pratap was released in the center of a nearby village. Ritchil's dead body was deposited at the local hospital, and later transferred for autopsy to the Tangail regional hospital before being released to his family for burial.

[1](#)4. (C) Pratap said a Major Elahi, then-commander of the local army camp, had overseen their detention and torture and Ritchil's subsequent death. He said Elahi was old friends with the local Forestry Department head. Father Homrich told us the Forestry Department had filed "thousands of charges" against Garos and other local residents, accusing them of illegal logging. According to Homrich and others present, these were an effort to cover up illegal logging by Forestry Department officials.

INVESTIGATION STAGNATES  
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[1](#)5. (C) Ambassador asked what the status of the investigation

was. The Assistant Police Inspector said an "unnatural death" charge had been filed, but the case could not be investigated since they had not received the post-mortem report from the local civil surgeon. Father Boniface Tolentino, priest of the nearby Jalchhatra Catholic mission where Ritchil attended church, accused the police of having filed the "unnatural death" charge themselves to prevent the family from being able to file charges against the army (since two charges cannot be filed for the same case). Tolentino also said it was a "disgrace" that a month had passed since Ritchil's death and the post-mortem report still could not be found. The inspector admitted the police had filed the "unnatural death" charge, but deferred further questions to his superior, who was not present.

MILITARY DISMISSES CONCERNS, THEN AGREES TO INVESTIGATE  
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¶6. (C) In a meeting on April 16 with the Ambassador, Army Chief of Staff Lt. General Moeen Uddin Ahmed said Ritchil's death had resulted from him running into a tree intoxicated while fleeing army soldiers who were trying to detain him (Reftel B). Asked by the Ambassador to explain the numerous, credible contrary accounts of the incident, Moeen agreed to investigate.

COMMENT: GARO UNITED IN ADVOCATING THIS CASE  
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¶7. (C) Security at the Pirgachha mission, including deployment of police and RAB officers, was ostensibly for the Ambassador's protection, but nevertheless there was more "protection" than normal. The fact that the Garo community is so united, and that they were not intimidated by the presence of law enforcement officers in the meeting, speaks to their

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determination to see this case exposed and resolved. We sought assurances from Father Homrich before going there that our visit would not create more harrassment for the local community. Quite the contrary, Homrich felt it might even help in the long-term by demonstrating serious Embassy interest in the case.

¶8. (SBU) Post continues to monitor the situation and is in regular communication with the mission.  
BUTENIS